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Coney Island, USA: America in the Yiddish literary imagination

These days, the lingua franca on the Boardwalk in Brighton Beach is Russian. For every ice cream parlor there are two Gastronoms named after another city in the former Soviet Union. On any given morning, rain or shine, winter or summer, you can see a group of Russian Jews doing calisthenics on the beach. For some, the boardwalk joining Brighton Beach to Sea Gate via Coney Island represents Odessa. For others, its Russian restaurants, night-clubs, fruit stands, and bookstores represent their ethnic haven in the New World, within earshot of the ubiquitous El (New York elevated railway).

These Russian Jews have closed the circle of the mass immigration to America, not only because the beaches and baths, Luna Park and Dreamland, Thousand-and-One-Nights and Tower of Seville were the first taste of paradise for millions of their coreligionists, but also because, with their backs to America and their faces to the ocean, the new immigrants have replicated a whole era in Jewish American culture. By the first decade of the twentieth century, Coney Island became the physical and psychological boundary between the Old World and the New, a liminal, conflictual space where one's longing – and loathing – for the Old World were experienced most keenly; where, awash in the sea of humanity, or as pilgrim to this mecca of mass amusement, the Jewish newcomer sometimes felt more alone than anywhere else. On the beach itself, a million footsteps and a thousand sand castles are washed away daily with the tide. So too the Jewish cultural experiment whose bold contours were highlighted so clearly against the backdrop of Brighton Beach and Coney Island. It has vanished, with nary a trace, so that each generation is left to repeat the cycle all over again: from exile, to deliverance, to exile.

From Castle Garden they were thrust headlong not into a melting pot, but a *keslgrub*, a whirlpool as much linguistic as socioeconomic. Never before had so many Yiddish-speaking Jews been forced to rub shoulders with other Jews from different regions and speaking different dialects. Historically,

the “Litvaks” came first, those from Posen, Kurland, and Suwalki, who spoke a heavily Germanicized Yiddish, and those from (Jewish) Lithuania, whose pronunciation was closest to an imagined, privileged, standard. But the “Rumener” were not far behind, speaking a variant of Ukrainian (Southeastern) Yiddish, not to speak of the much-maligned “Galitsyaner”, who shared a Southwestern dialect with the Polish Jews, and who because of their extreme poverty, got saddled with a worse reputation, and unlike the Rumanians, had no matinee idol named Aaron Lebedeff to sing their praises. Besides breeding mutual contempt, living in such close quarters sharpened one's ear for the particular sources of one's language, especially the Slavic component. Litvaks fused more Russian into their speech; the others, more Polish and Ukrainian. Thus New York's Lower East Side, and later, Brownsville and Harlem, were something of a linguistic pressure chamber, cultural differences further reinforced by the presence of Goyim, who spoke their own local variant of Low Goyish (Italian, Irish Brogue, Pigeon English) or High Goyish (Public School English).

Every Yiddish-speaker already came endowed with what Max Weinreich called “component-consciousness,” an intuitive grasp of the three language groups that together shape modern Yiddish – Hebrew-Aramaic (what Jews call *loshn-koydesh*), Germanic, and Slavic – each carrying a specific affective load (Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, 592–595, 656–657). In America, that affective load shifted dramatically. The Hebrew-Aramaic component became, on the one hand, more attenuated, as religious observance plummeted, and on the other, more precious, as certain key words assumed an almost talismanic quality: *toyre* (Torah), *Kaddish*, *khevre kedishe* (Hevra Kadisha, the Burial Society). While among the *landslayt* (people from the same home town), the Slavic component might conjure up the rustic qualities of the Old Home, it more easily marked one as a greenhorn, someone still mired in the *shtetl* outback, the moment one strayed beyond the confines of the *landsmanshaft*, one's home-town society. That left the only unifying – and dignifying – component of the language, the Germanic. Unifying, because it was adopted straightaway by the American Yiddish press, some of whose pioneers just happened to hail from Kurland and environs; and dignifying, because German was the language of Enlightenment, and its handmaiden, socialism. The very titles of the leading newspapers betrayed this genetic link: *Arbayter-tsaytung* (Workers' Newspaper), *Forverts* (Forward), *Fraye arbayter-shtime* (Free Workers' Voice), *Di varhayt* (The Truth).

All Yiddish writing in America, therefore, whether highbrow or low, and all Yiddish theater, which with some notable exceptions was unabashedly low, exploited the components of the language in new ways. What existed before in a state of creative fusion now deconstructed. By isolating or

exaggerating each component, the speaker, writer, or vaudeville performer could either parody that piece of the past that now seemed most outmoded, or elevate that severed link into an object of longing. Built into the very language that every Yiddish-speaker brought from home was a triangular structure rife with emotive possibilities. Each linguistic component, if deconstructed or unmoored, could function independently as a pole of longing, or loathing. The *loshn-koydesh* component could either bespeak one's liberation from the bondage of the religious tradition, or a desire to reconnect to a rescuable part thereof. The Slavic component, by the same token, could signify either good riddance to *shtetl* (Jewish market town of East Europe) backwardness or a nostalgia for one's native, bucolic, landscape. The Germanic component, to the extent that it merged with the vast fund of neologisms that entered into every modern language bespoke an attachment either to the here-and-now or to the imagined future. As we shall see, it was the singular achievement of Yiddish writers in America to raise this triangular structure to a new level of self-consciousness and sophistication. After isolating each component and endowing it with a particular emotional valence, the American Yiddish poets and prose writers added a temporal layer of signification. The Hebrew-Aramaic component stood in for the distant, mythic past; the Slavic, for the recent, severed past; and the Germanic, for the present and future. Here was a linguistic structure for all seasons, especially well suited to chart the dizzying, veritable Coney Island called America.

The poet and prose writer Morris Rosenfeld (1862–1923) captured the hearts and minds of the newly proletarianized Jewish urban masses by articulating their sense of triple banishment: exiled from home, from nature, and by extension, from God. As Rosenfeld repeatedly stresses, nowhere in the New World can one find a physical space that mediates between the poles of desire. “Nit zukh mikh vu di mirtzn grinen,” begins one of his most famous poems, set to an exquisitely poignant melody.

Gefinst mikh dortn nit, mayn shats.
Vu lebns velkn bay mashinen
Dortn iz mayn rueplats.
 (“My Resting Place,” 150–151)

(Look for me not where myrtles green!
Not there, my darling, shall I be.
Where lives are lost at the machine
that's the only place for me.)
 (“My Place,” 78–79)

Once displaced by the machine, there is no return to nature; once enslaved by capitalist servitude, there is no hope of achieving individual freedom. One's only *rueplats*, or resting place, lies in the private domain, in the arms of one's true love.

While Rosenfeld wrote lyric evocations of traditional Jewish life in his native Lithuanian village of Boshka, and on occasion conjured up a Promised Land that he never stepped foot on, his landscape was thoroughly American. When he did venture forth from the Lower East Side, he discovered the enigma of Niagara Falls (“Who will triumph: the Primeval Spirit of the Falls or the factories that harness its might?”), and perceived God in the “sublime seriousness” of the southwestern Catskills (*Geveylte shriftn* II, 99–159). These dreamscapes exist out there, as distant objects of desire, while at the core of the Jewish American experience lay the urban jungle. Rosenfeld was the first Yiddish writer to confront that urban landscape and to exploit the Yiddish language to render its particularity.

Korner vey un elnt shteyt an alte hayzl:
untzn iz a shenkl, oybn iz a klayzl.
Untzn kumen lumpn oyfton nor neveyles,
oybn kumen yidn, klogn afn goles.

Corner of Pain and Anguish, there's a worn old house:
tavern on the street floor, Bible room upstairs.
Scoundrels sit below, and all day long they souse.
On the floor above them, Jews sob out their prayers.

At the crossroads of two personified but generalized expressions of sorrow stands an old and semi-mythic house. We know the house is somewhere in urban America because of the first word, *korner*. *Korner* is an Americanism, one of only two such linguistic markers in the whole poem. *Vey*, or pain, is more social; *elnt*, loneliness, more personal. The house itself is subdivided: on the ground floor are the low-lives, presumably Gentiles, “practicing debauchery.” On the second floor are the Jews, pouring out their hearts to God. Together they express a differentiated response to the same condition of uprootedness, as they are audibly yoked together by the Hebraic and semantically laden off-rhyme of *neveyles/goles*, heinousness and exile.

Higher on the third floor, there's another room:
not a single window welcomes in the sun.
Seldom does it know the blessing of a broom.
Rottenness and filth are blended into one.

The higher you go, the more filth you collect. In the new social order, floor is ceiling.

Ot in dizn mokem arbetrn zikh flaysik
 un tsufridn, dakht zikh, bay an erekh draysik
 opgetserte mener, opgetserte vayber,
 mit tsiterdike gayster un farvelkte layber.

Toiling without letup in that sunless den:
 nimble-fingered and (or so it seems) content,
 sit some thirty blighted women, blighted men,
 with their spirits broken, and their bodies spent.

Mokem means place, from the Hebrew, *makom*, only in Yiddish it carries the additional meaning of the non-Jewish part of town. So when Rosenfeld introduces the third floor with the super-emphatic “ot in dizn mokem,” in this very place, and casts an admiring look upon these (young) men and women working so industriously – at least someone in this old house is doing productive labor – we are startled to see their true physical state. To whom are they beholden? What power binds them to that terrible “place”?

Scurf-head struts among them: always with a frown,
 acting like His Royal Highness in a play;
 for the shop is his, and here he wears the crown,
 and they must obey him, silently obey.

(“The Sweatshop,” 84–85)

King of the shop, the crown of creation, who occupies the highest rung in the new social order is the only named person in the poem, Motke Parkh – no doubt his ugly nickname in the *shtetl*. For the scum of the Old World now reigns over the New, and if you don’t like it, there’s nothing you can do, as the closing couplet makes eminently clear: “un di shap iz zayne . . . muz men folgn, folgn on a tayne” (for the shop is his . . . and they must obey him, silently obey).

In his poetry, Rosenfeld exploits the components of the language in new ways. For him, *loshn-koydesh* is the domain of transcendental values rooted in Scripture and the liturgy, hence the didactic force of rhyming *goles*, *Galut*, exile, with *neveyles*, debauchery, from the Hebrew root, *n-b-l*, to behave scandalously. Rosenfeld stood at the forefront of a movement of cultural revolutionaries for whom German was the embodiment of universal, secular values, whether drawn from the realm of science, socialism, or aesthetics. By rhyming such dignified, High German, words as *mayn shats*, my darling, with *rueplats*, he bespeaks a world of new aspirations. As for the Slavic component of Yiddish, Rosenfeld uses it very sparingly, usually to denote the realia of the old rural lifestyle. *Parkh* (scurf-head) is a Polish loan word.

To be a Yiddish writer in the New World was to chronicle the degradations of exile and the dreams that failed. By creating a poeticized landscape out

of the sweatshop and slums, Rosenfeld introduced a species of romantic realism. By staking out what he saw to be the heart of urban darkness, and by creating a synthetic and modern poetic diction, Rosenfeld also heralded the emancipation of Yiddish. There is nothing parochial about his oeuvre. He never adopts the stance of a minority poet, of a beggar standing at the gates of high culture. In America, and only in America, could a Jew speak for all Americans by speaking as a Jew. But given the social realities of his day, the only way Rosenfeld could be mainstreamed was as a poet of the “ghetto.” In 1898, six years after the publication of Israel Zangwill’s best-selling novel, *Children of the Ghetto*, Leo Wiener, an instructor in the Slavic languages at Harvard University, issued a bilingual selection of Rosenfeld’s *Songs from the Ghetto* with the Yiddish rendered into German spelling and Gothic script and the English rendered into prose. On the strength of this little book, Rosenfeld became the first Yiddish celebrity on American college campuses and, at the height of his fame, was feted by European nobility.

So quickly did Rosenfeld fall from grace, however, that his monumental achievement is easily obscured. His subject was the inhuman social conditions of the sweatshop – the locus of alienation from one’s past, one’s family, and one’s own self. Within that center of alienation there flowed vectors of desire: back to the natural and covenantal landscape of one’s youth and forward to the day of universal liberation and national return. Though never given the credit, Rosenfeld enshrined what was to become the structure of triangular desire for all of American Yiddish writing to come.

By the time of Sholem Asch’s (1880–1957) first visit to America, in 1909, there was already in place a body of prose fiction and serious drama that employed that structure. Most famous were the melodramas of Jacob Gordin (1853–1909), then at the peak of his career. Gordin’s classic, *God, Man, and Devil* (1900), for example, presents a marriage paradigm in which a childless middle-aged man marries his niece in order to sire children, even while a more suitable bachelor waits in the wings (29–95).

The bare bones of *Uncle Moses* (1918), the second novel Asch wrote about America, adopts this marriage paradigm with only minor variation. As befits the New World, Moses Melnik is a ruthless capitalist who (unlike Gordin’s Hershele Dubrovner) needs no divine intervention to make him sin. As the owner of a sweatshop that employs, or rather, enslaves, all of former Kuzmin, Uncle Moses can have the pick of the crop. And so he plies his virginal “niece” Masha with lavish gifts until she is ready to be plucked. Charlie is the young bachelor waiting on the sidelines. He possesses considerably more class consciousness than his Old World prototype, the *tallis* weaver, Motl, but is similarly naive when it comes to women. In both Gordin’s play and Asch’s

novel, the misalliance signals a breach both of natural continuity and of social justice. From Gordin, in other words, Asch learned how to combine in the same cast of characters the twin themes of class and generational conflict that so preoccupied American Yiddish audiences and readers throughout the whole period of mass immigration.

The novel opens with the sun setting over downtown New York, described as "a devastated Babylon," the cityscape dominated by the Williamsburg Bridge, an "iron giant" with "a mighty Hand" (*Uncle Moses*, 3). Completing the picture are the subway cars, described as steel monsters with flaming heads. This is an industrial landscape endowed with mythic grandeur and elemental force. As the main reference point on the spatial compass, it signifies the universal might of nature and technology.

The second point is the sweatshop. By 1918, most of Asch's readers no longer worked under such primitive, pre-unionized, conditions. Most sweatshops, moreover, were of the type where Uncle Berl works, lowscale shops where even the most Orthodox Jew must rub shoulders with non-Jews. In the shop of Uncle Moses, atypically, men and women do not work alongside each other, and the boss hires only Jewish workers, all of whom hail from his native town of Kuzmin. So the shop is really a New World *shtetl*, where everyone is still known by his nickname, where cantorial pieces are sung to wile away the time, and where Yiddish is the lingua franca. Skillfully exploiting his workers' memories of the Old Country, Moses Melnik provides for them from cradle to grave, all the while paying them slave wages and fooling them into working even on the Sabbath. Behind his back, they call him Pharaoh.

In 1918, the East European heartland lay in ruins, and Asch was using this novel of the recent past to tell his readers what they needed to hear: you can't go home again. The *shtetl* – the third point on the compass – was dead and about to be buried. In the novel, two characters return to Kuzmin, to die. And lest anyone think that the *shtetl* can be Americanized, Asch has this to say: "Uncle Moses made all the citizens of Kuzmin equals. There were no more fashionables, no elders and no tradesmen, no Talmudic scholars and no dunces . . . all of them now served one god, all were doing the same kind of work – they were sewing trousers" (*Uncle Moses*, 47). Yes, these men still "remembered Kuzmin with love and longing as they sat there, holding their work in their hands" (48), but equality in the present meant the equality of the oppressed. The site of true equality and freedom was not the sweatshop, but . . . Coney Island.

Nature for Asch, as for the poet, Morris Rosenfeld before him, is the counternorm, the inexhaustible source of renewal. The Kuzminer are transported by their longing for the mighty Vistula of their youth, but only for a fleeting moment. For their children, Masha and Charlie, Kuzmin is a distant

memory, and so they extricate themselves of a Sunday from the teeming streets of Harlem, and hop a subway ride to the beach. Asch devotes three whole chapters to their day in Coney Island, the ideological centerpiece of the novel.

These youngsters, who are forced to bear a heavy burden of responsibility, are returned to a state of nature in Coney Island. Always exposed to the sight of people working, suffering, and sorrowing together, Charlie is exhilarated by the startling sight of the same masses enjoying life together, just having a good time. Stimulated by the oceanic experience of the waves, and by the physical contact with the family of man, Charlie waxes rhapsodic:

There are those who dislike Coney Island, because Coney Island is the place of the raw masses, who pollute the ocean with the trash from their picnics and crowd out the beach with their ungainly, ugly bodies . . . But I would be bored enjoying myself all alone . . . or spending my time only with fortunate people, with the chosen few, who have the opportunity to enjoy life. True enjoyment can be had only here, when one sees how the great masses are having fun. Then it seems as if there were no longer any evil or suffering in the world, that this joy is meant for everyone. (*Onkl Mozes* [Yiddish], 151)¹

For Charlie, the budding ideologue, Coney Island is a place not only to enjoy, but also to argue for. Those who gainsay its value are not, interestingly enough, his comrades on the Left, who, like Art Young, later pictured Coney Island as belonging to the Devil, seducing the masses with tinsel and cheap thrills, but members of the moneyed elite, people of privilege for whom Coney Island was once a fashionable resort. Asch, swept away by Charlie's rambling monologue, then rhapsodizes in his own voice about the Edenic pleasure of so many almost-naked bodies rubbing up against each other. Walking unself-consciously hand-in-hand, Charlie and Masha "had the feeling that a great Messiah had come and annulled all prohibitions, permitting everything, so that everywhere in the world one person could freely mix with another . . ." (*Onkl Mozes*, 156).

As in the novel's opening scene, on the Williamsburg Bridge, the universal landscape of nature is coupled with the magic of modern technology. But whereas only the narrator was privy to the opening epiphany, here, in Coney Island, the magic is apprehendable by all. Masha and Charlie are "stupefied" by their ride on the giant roller-coaster. As the sun begins to set, Coney Island is transformed into a dream-city, a picture-book world. And their day-trip ends as follows:

Proud turrets, of a fantastic other-worldly beauty, brilliantly lighted turrets, towered above the shining buildings. They were like the towers of sacred temples, descended from the heavens. The flashing lights in the bright streets, the

blazing turrets suggested the heights of Olympus, the holy cities of Mecca or Jerusalem. Majestic, radiant, compelling – a wonder-city, this Coney Island – a city for which to be infinitely grateful, because it brought gaiety, happiness, release from the crassness of reality to millions and millions of people.

(*Onkl Mozes* 165; *Uncle Moses*, 109)

So Coney Island is a necessary catharsis and a foretaste of true democracy. Whatever social, religious, or sexual barriers the ocean and the beach do not break down, the amusement park is there to purge the last vestige of earth-bound inhibition. Its thousand and one nights allow all visitors to play out their most elemental fantasies, to imagine a paradise-on-earth, to achieve communion in a New Jerusalem.

Twenty years elapsed between the publication of *Uncle Moses* and its reworking into English, in 1938. How the world, America, and the Jews had changed in that period of time! Against the backdrop of rising antisemitism in Europe, Asch expunged much of the novel's gross sexuality, as well as the more innocent passages about close body contact on the crowded beach. Meanwhile, back in America, the New Deal was in full swing, and Asch had become a firm believer in the three worlds of American Jewry: *di velt*, this world, *yene velt*, the world-to-come, and *Roosevelt*. Against this backdrop, Charlie's revolutionary rhetoric was passé, if not downright subversive. America had become the crucible of Asch's most fervent ecumenical hopes, and the escapist pleasures offered by Coney Island he would eventually replace with the social integration achieved on the banks of the *East River* (1946).

Having witnessed the failed revolution of 1905 – the dream of a New Russia followed by the nightmare of new pogroms – a whole generation of Jewish intellectuals emigrated to America. Some, the fledgling poets and prose writers among them, displaced their radical politics by ushering in an aesthetic revolution. These so-called *Yunge*, or youngsters, summarily rejected the didactic, collectivist voice of organized labor, and strove instead to achieve the still small voice of Yiddish poetry. To signal their separation from the street below, these young poets typically positioned themselves at a window, and proceeded to cultivate a mood. To signal the independence of the poem from the poet, they adopted masks, the more exotic the better. So while Rosenfeld, the Romantic poet, had used the lyric "I" to represent an authentic authorial voice, which spoke, in turn, of an experience typical of any lover, worker, or father, *Di Yunge* introduced a Symbolist poetics of strangeness.

No persona was more at odds with his surroundings than Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's (1886–1932) "Street Drummer," marching to his own angry

beat, and nowhere was the poet's alienation from the masses more pronounced than on the crowded beach at Coney Island, at around ten in the morning.

Un az Moyshe-Leyb, der poet, vet dertseyln,
az er hot dem toyt af di khvalyes gezen,
azoy vi men zet zikh aleyn in a shpigl,
un dos in der fri gor, azoy arum tsen –
tsi vet men dos gleybn Moyshe-Leybn?

Un az Moyshe-Leyb hot dem toyt fun der vaytn
bagrist mit a hant un gefregt vi es geyst?
Un davke beys s'hobn mentshn fil toyznt
in vaser zikh vild mit dem lebn gefreyt –
tsi vet men dos gleybn Moyshe-Leybn?

(And if Moyshe-Leyb, Poet, recounted how
He's glimpsed Death in the breaking waves, the way
You catch that sight of yourself in the mirror
At about 10:00 A.M. on some actual day,
Who would be able to believe Moyshe-Leybl?)

And if Moyshe-Leyb greeted Death from afar,
With a wave of his hand, asking, "Thing's all right?"
At the moment when many a thousand people
Lived there in the water, wild with delight,
Who would be able to believe Moyshe-Leybl?)

("Memento Mori," trans. John Hollander)

This is the poet's "Memento Mori," its high-sounding title emblazoned in the Latin alphabet, no less. Comically at odds with the morbid, otherworldly conventions of the genre, in which the poet contemplates his mortality in the dead of night, the speaker in this poem adopts a playful, ironic, conversational tone, "the voice of Yiddish culture itself," as Harold Bloom once put it, and with seemingly effortless rhymes, evokes a landscape at once banal and bizarre. Coney Island is nowhere mentioned by name, but where else would a Yiddish poet be carousing in the water with "many a thousand people . . . wild with delight" at about ten in the morning? He sees what the multitude cannot. Only the poet sees death in the midst of life as something familiar, seductive, and in the fourth and final stanza, dazzling. Is it any wonder that no one would believe him?

Who is this Moyshe-Leyb, Poet, anyway? Presumably, some uprooted young Jewish immigrant, a *talush* in bathing trunks, so disenchanted with life that he contemplates suicide. What is *more* ludicrous: yearning for death on a Coney Island summer's day, or writing a carefully wrought poem in the

Yiddish language and with a Latin title amidst the shouts and wild laughter of the urban masses?

The poet at the seashore is one of two major tropes in Halpern's oeuvre, both of them parodic. The first is the city eclogue, or urban pastoral, which opens his first book of poems, *In New York* (1919).

What a garden, where the tree is
Bare, but for its seven leaves,
And it seems it is amazed:
"Who has set me in this place?"
What a garden, what a garden –
It takes a magnifying glass
Just to see a little grass.
Is this garden here our own,
As it is, in light of dawn?
Sure, it's our garden. What, not our garden?
(*"Our Garden,"* 194–195)

Gone is the pathos of Morris Rosenfeld's "*Mayn rueplats*." The binary opposition between the bounties and solace of nature and the depredations of urban life is here a given. The attempt to render the alienation of the urban metropolis in a high poetic diction is here replaced with the ironic inflection of the spoken idiom, what Benjamin Harshav calls "talk verse."

Halpern replaces Rosenfeld's semi-mythic and emotionally fraught landscape, "*korner vey un elnt*," with a mock-mythic Garden of Eden, inspired by Hester Park on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the one bit of foliage and grass the Yiddish-speaking immigrant is likeliest to see (Wisse, *A Little Love*, 101). There follows a cycle of poems that play the conventions of pastoral poetry off the tenements, drying laundry, and garbage cans of Lower Manhattan. Left unfinished at the end of his short life was a poetic sequence called "*Shtotgortn*," modeled, this time, on Central Park.

Pockets of nature within the metropolis are where Halpern dilates upon the nature of his own poetry and his own nature as a poet. Here, every tree, every statue, every passerby stimulates another rumination. But the seashore is something else, a setting at once more social (being that we are still in Coney Island) and universal. For Halpern, it marks the outer boundary of exile.

Never for a moment did Halpern forget that the Jewish master narrative was bounded at one end by *kriyes yam-suf*, the miraculous splitting of the sea of reeds, and by the fateful ocean crossing to America, at the other. Somewhere in between, there was the Yiddish love song about a golden peacock who came flying across the ocean from a distant land. She had lost her golden feather along the way, because she carried bitter tidings from a newly wedded daughter to her parents back home ("*The Golden Peacock*").

Halpern turned the golden peacock into an emblem of loss, a symbol of unrequited longing, or, worse yet, into an icon of all one's debased dreams and idolatrous desires. Whosoever stood at the seashore looking back was likewise reminded of the home left behind, of lost love, of the divine promises that were never kept. From every shore, the ocean crossing was dead-ended.

Di goldene pave (1924), Halpern's second book of poems, is a modernist mock-epic about exile, "an ontology of homelessness," in Ruth Wisse's astute formulation (*A Little Love*, 136). It begins "*Fun yener zayt yam*," at the far side of the ocean, i.e., in Eastern Europe, and ends with two poetic sequences, one starring the familiar rascal, Moyshe-Leyb, the other starring his sidekick, a philosopher-beach-bum named Zarkhi, both of whom smoke a pipe, lust after women, and spend all their time at the seashore in Coney Island. Moyshe-Leyb is usually there by day. Zarkhi can be seen only at night.

It is no easier to define what Halpern means by exile than to characterize the precise nature of his modernism. Neither is there any consensus about who Zarkhi represents and where he comes from. Is he modeled on one of the Coney Island neighborhood peddlers, or on a character from an otherwise unmemorable story by Herman Gold? Is the name Zarkhi supposed to resonate – ironically, to be sure – with the Hebrew "dawn" or "brightness," or is he Zerah of the Bible, twin brother to Peretz, born from the union of Tamar and her father-in-law, Judah?

One thing is certain: Zarkhi is the distillation of all of Halpern's longing and loathing, and that is why he lives and dies on the seashore at Coney Island, his back to America, his face to the sea.

Oh Zarkhi, Zarkhi, you cannot cause
A bridge to be built straight across
Over the sea, to go there and back –
And your longing stands on the other side
With red-raised paws, and calls and cries
Like a village broad who needs a man –
Needs a man,
Needs a man.

(*"Zarkhi to Himself,"* 421)

The longing is eroticized, and also rendered debased and vulgar by its personification as a man-starved village broad with fat ugly hands. Throughout the Zarkhi cycle, Halpern mocks the very concept of a bridge of longing, when all desire is in fact debased, crass, unattainable, and absurd; when that which lies on the other side is in many ways even uglier than what lies here.

It is the mockery of all sancta – whether religious, cultural, or aesthetic – that is most shocking about this cycle of poems, and that which distinguishes Halpern from among his contemporaries. It may very well be, as Wisse

argues, that Halpern's sense of reality coincided at this critical point with the editorial thrust of the communist *Frayhayt*: "the first step toward the realization of a new social order is the destruction of false beliefs" (*A Little Love*, 117). But a poetry so complicated, contradictory, fragmentary, and shockingly obscene, cannot possibly be enlisted in the cause of a new social order.

The Zarkhi poems are more than an allegory of exile. They enact its condition: the condition of an intellectual amidst the craving for material pleasure; the condition of an aesthete amidst the ugliness and slime; the condition of an immigrant whose life is lived only at night amidst people of his own imaginings; the condition of a Jew, who hates the world that craves his blood and whose own civilization is morally bankrupt.

Even death holds out no solace. Zarkhi dies, is buried in "the covenantal community of New York, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-Three" (epigraph to canto XXIII), and his epitaph fittingly ends with a parody of Halpern's "Memento Mori."

When daybreak finally comes, it finds the poet alone with his beloved wife. And here is the most startling moment of all, brilliantly rendered into English by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav. The woman in this poem represents a rejection of intellectuality. The playfulness represents a rejection of modernist angst. The lullaby represents a return to Rosenfeld's "Mayn rueplats".

So I ask my dear wife
How to finish the affair
Of my little booky –
Says she: Let happiness leave on a train
And wave back with a hanky.
Says I: Hanky-panky –
Says she: Booky-shmooky –
And asks me whether I'd like
With my coffee a cooky.
Says I: Cooky-shmooky –
And tell her to put a case on my pillow
And not to play hooky.
Says she: Hooky-shmooky.
And tells me to repair her shoe
By hook or by crooky.
Says I: Crooky-shmooky.
So she jumps up, and points at my head:
I am bald and spooky.
Says I:
Spooky-crooky-hooky-cooky-hanky-panky-booky-shmooky.
But she cannot say it as fast as I can, as fast as I can.

Spooky-crooky-hooky-cooky-hanky-panky-booky-shmooky.
So we laugh together –
Laugh so nice.
Till she closes my eyes –
Closes my eyes.
And rocks me with a song of rain and light,
Rain and light,
That you sing to little children at night
Children at night. ("The End of the Book," 429)

Notice that as Yiddish in America increasingly becomes a language of exile, its greatest poet turns ever more inward, finding internal resources heretofore untapped. It is as if the language itself became the surrogate for the structure of triangular loathing and longing. For Halpern, as we have seen, the loathing far outstrips the longing, as he pits one linguistic realm against the other. He returns Hebrew-Aramaic to its *Sixt-im-Leben*, the study house and *shul*, in order to parody the form and substance of the Jewish intellectual tradition. Whole chapters of the Zarkhi cycle are written in the language of *lernen*, of Torah study, and they are wickedly funny. If *loshn-koydesh* is the realm of Jacob, then Slavic is the language of Esau, the bloodthirsty, drunken goy. No love lost for the earthiness of the Lithuanian village, for the sounds of the mighty Vistula, for the village broad with her red-raised paws. That leaves the Germanic component, which Halpern also uses against itself. His hallmark is the monosyllabic rhyme – *boym:koym, gloz:groz, zayt:shrayt, brik:tsurik* – or the doggerel that in Yiddish is associated with the *badkhn*, the professional wedding jester: *orglen:gorglen, unter:arunter*. In rare moments of reprieve, he returns to the only unadulterated domain of language, that of lullaby and nonsense rhymes.

America was the measure of Halpern's modernism, the locus of the here-and-now, the reason the components of his Yiddish invariably short-circuited one another. With the rarest exception, he allowed for no escape. However many days, weeks, or months Moyshe-Leyb, Poet, and his sidekick Zarkhi, spent on Coney Island, they stayed rooted to the seashore and never once frequented the rides. (Did either have a nickel to spare?) And however long they remained in America, they remained in America, and the past was enlivened only within its new poetic confines, and only for parodic ends: his ode to "Zlochew, the town of the dead"; his subversive ballads; his "Slavic Motifs." The destruction of the Jewish world in the Second World War I moved him to look back in anguish, but what Halpern found in the past was not a thousand-year-long funeral cortege – the unbroken legacy of Jewish tradition – but a series of dreams – and the way he saw it was through the private lens of his own life. Halpern's stubborn, punishing, refusal to countenance a

usable past singled him out from among all his contemporaries, for even the most radical among them, either routinely or eventually, divided their time between the New World and the Old.

This was most pronounced among the poets, beginning with his arch-rival and alter-ego, Mani Leyb (1883–1953). In 1918, the annus mirabilis of his career, Mani Leyb published three volumes of his collected verse, each celebrating the expressive possibilities of a different component of Yiddish: the personal and daringly erotic lyric poems gathered together in *Lider* used the Germanic component almost exclusively; the *Ballads* introduced *loshn-koydesh* to add an archaic, epic quality; and the *Jewish and Slavic Motifs* (so wickedly parodied by Halpern), luxuriated upon the Slavic elements in his Ukrainian Yiddish. Soon to follow were lavishly illustrated volumes of children's verse, which conjured up a perfect, poetic, childhood by harmonizing all the components.

Discarding the recent achievements of Yiddish writing in Russia–Poland as neo-romantic pabulum for the unlettered masses, the young H. Leivick (1888–1962) set out to reinvent a tragic-messianic past that stretched from Siberian exile back to the Golem of Prague, and farther still, to Jesus and the Messiah, son of David (“Di-on traditsye,” 12–21). Leivick worked his transhistorical magic by means of free rhythmic concatenations and a proto-archaic diction that hearkened back to the *khumeshtaytsh* tradition of old. Indeed, the greatest single achievement of American Yiddish poetry turned out to be the complete, and annotated, Bible translation of Leivick's fellow-Litvak, Yehoash (Solomon Bloomgarten, 1872–1927). Before rehabilitating the biblical landscape for a generation consigned to wander the urban American desert, Yehoash sought and found a new poetic language to render nature, the Orient, and Native American landscapes. And so the search for new expressive possibilities led the poets back to the wellsprings of Jewish culture: to the Bible, the liturgy, the language of learning, hasidic lore. Even Zishe Landau (1889–1937), the chief ideologue of *Di Yunge*, who cultivated a phlegmatic, dandified persona, eventually discovered positive aesthetic uses for the spiritual legacy of his hasidic grandparents.

And what of the women poets? Coney Island and the Atlantic seaboard they apparently left to the men. Does this suggest that they abdicated the American landscape altogether, choosing realms of solipsism instead? By applying our triangular model – selective and schematic by design – to American Yiddish writing by women, the student will discover that Anna Margolin (1887–1952), for example, described “Girls in Crotona Park” in the Bronx and Malka Heifetz-Tussman (1896–1987) staked out the deserts and waterways of the American West in order to map alternative vectors of desire and eroticized states of exile. Almost unique among American Yiddish poets,

Kadya Molodowsky (1894–1975) sojourned in the original Promised Land and sang praises thereto.

Of the prose writers, America demanded realism, and the dictates of critical realism mandated that they chart the complex and rapidly changing social landscape of America: the revolution in sexual mores, in politics, in culture. But once the wave of mass immigration had peaked, and Eastern Europe became the Old Country, *di alte heyim*, even writers who were not (yet) affiliated with one or another of the New York Yiddish dailies felt obliged to memorialize the abandoned *shtetl*. David Ignatoff (1885–1954) tried to straddle New York's seething *Cauldron* (1918) and the *Legends of Old Prague* (1920). For Isaac Raboy (1882–1944), who hailed from the Bessarabian outback, horses were the chief link to the past. After describing his exotic life as a stud farmer in North Dakota in *Her Goldenbarg* (1916), Raboy rendered his *Bessarabian Jews* (1922–1923) as salt of the earth. For Joseph Opatoshu (1887–1954), no such seamless transition was possible. As a died-in-the-wool naturalist, Opatoshu exposed moral depravity in *From the New York Ghetto* (1914), these slices-of-life rendered so stenographically that he had to append a glossary of American Yiddish slang for the benefit of readers back home. In contrast, the *shtetl* was a place where even horse thieves had hearts of gold (*Romance of a Horse Thief*, 1912), and every forest was redolent of legend and heroism *In Polish Woods* (1921). This split deepened over time, when the politics of the Left alienated Opatoshu still further from the American present and his triumphant visits to Poland and the USSR intensified his search for exemplars of Jewish heroism.

For Lamed Shapiro (1878–1948), the master of the short story, it was the legacy of murder, rape, and trauma that made the ocean crossing, and in the wake of World War I and the Ukrainian Civil War, Shapiro further elevated the pogrom to the status of Apocalypse. Gradually, however, Shapiro applied his impressionist technique to more humble themes: the life cycle of an exemplary Jewish merchant (“Smoke,” 1915), the aesthetic awakening of a yeshiva student (“Eating Days,” 1925–1926). Turning, definitively, to America, Shapiro captured the elusive dreamscape of the metropolis in “Newyorkish,” followed by “Doc,” the story of an uprooted Russian Jewish immigrant with the incongruous name of Benny Milgroym (Pomegranate). Virtually unique in Shapiro's oeuvre, “Doc” contains an hilarious episode on Coney Island, where, in a heavy-handed attempt to ensnare him into matrimony, Bennie is forced to take a camel ride along with his fellow-boarder, Sadie. While the camel named “Aaron” completes its prescribed thirty-foot circle without a hitch, Benny's “Moses” runs amuck, threatening to drag its frightened rider to an uncharted wilderness – or Promised Land. No home in *this* fake Mecca for the serious Yiddish muse!

After the gates had closed and the dreams for prosperity crashed, finding a new home for Yiddish became an ever more desperate problem. *Di Yunge*, who had launched the aesthetic revolution in such journals as *Di naye heym* (The new home) and *East Broadway*, issued their collective swansong in the appropriately titled *Der indzl* (The island, 1925–1926). The modernists, narrowing the domain of Yiddish to the poet's individual psyche, issued *In zikh* (In the self, 1920–1940), heralded by a manifesto with the off-putting title "Introspectivism" (translated by Anita Norich; Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, 774–784). Those who took their marching orders from Moscow signaled their allegiance with such titles as *Der hamer* (The hammer, 1926–1938) *Masn* (The masses, 1934), and *Signal* (1933–1936). The only middle ground, between the extremes of high modernism and revolutionary politics, was in the literary supplements and op-ed pages of the Yiddish daily press. Here it was possible for the arch-modernist Jacob Glatstein (1896–1971) to engage all topics literary and political, general and Jewish, and to forge a new synthetic style, at once idiomatic and thoroughly secular.

Were one to follow that secular trajectory, Glatstein would represent the sum and substance of Yiddish writing in America. As Halpern's heir apparent, he structured his first book of poems, *Yankev Glatshiteyn* (1921), according to Halpern's dismal plan. In bold, incremental stages, Glatstein moved from *Fraye ferzn* (Free verses, 1926), to *Credos* (1929), to the high-water mark of Yiddish modernist experimentation, *Yidishtaytshn* (Yiddish meanings, 1937). And then he returned to Poland, just long enough to see Polish Jewry in its cultural death throes. Thanks to his prescience, independence of mind, and commanding intellect, Glatstein charted the road back: back to a moral engagement with the fate of the Jews, back to the indigenous core of Yiddish culture, "back to the ghetto."

But not back to Coney Island.

Coney Island continued to belie all initiatives to create a self-sustaining Yiddish secular culture in America. And no one understood this better than a thirty-one-year-old Polish Jew named Yitskhok Bashevis (1904–1991),² one of the fortunate few to get a visa to America in the midst of the Depression and to land a lucrative job writing for the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Despite the plethora of such newspapers, despite the network of schools, the *landsman-shaftn* (home-town associations), labor unions, high- and lowbrow theater, Bashevis was convinced that Yiddish secularism had failed, and one had only to listen to American Jews talking – from Brighton Beach to Miami Beach – to realize that Yiddish had ceased to be a universal Jewish language. So what was left?

By 1943, Bashevis had found the answer, and let his literary colleagues know it, in a manifesto innocently titled "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America." Bashevis argued that because the old language, replete with such quaint Slavisms as *vetshere*, *podeshve*, *kholeve*, and *zavyase*, sounds utterly absurd in an American context; and because the language actually spoken by American Jews was a vulgar patois, a creole, the only alternative for a writer of Yiddish prose was to return to a reimagined past. He called on the surviving Yiddish writers to turn their backs on America, and to reclaim a world in which Yiddish was inseparable from *yiddishkayt* (Jewishness).

Having delivered the radically conservative message, Bashevis then delivered the modernist goods. He perfected an art of demonic realism, grounded in the lexicon of Torah, Talmud, and Zohar; in the cadences of Yiddish folk-speech; in a minutely realized prewar Polish landscape; and in the fantastically complex triangular drama of Id, Ego, and Superego. Faithfully adhering to the rigorous terms of his own manifesto, he produced some of his greatest work (Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, chapter 10).

But as in his fiction, so in life, such rules were made only to be broken. "Like the libertines of his stories who require a social context of propriety," to quote Ruth Wisse, "Singer defines a thoroughly conservative norm which he may then bedevil and transgress" ("Singer's Paradoxical Progress," 152). This is what happened to Bashevis in the early Thirties, and it happened again, in January 1957, when he began to serialize in the *Jewish Daily Forward* a huge novel set in Manhattan and Miami Beach that would take a year's worth of installments to complete. If Sholem Asch had enshrined a working class, multi-ethnic enclave on 48th Street, next to the East River, then Bashevis laid claim to the other side of town, where Jews lived in fancy apartments and each Jew spoke many languages.

Shadows on the Hudson is a rambling novel that recycles Singer's favorite plot of one extremely brainy man simultaneously involved with three women, but who still finds time for lengthy philosophical ruminations. The American setting is as yet hardly more than a tease, and Manhattan is but a shadow of Warsaw. By 1960, however, Bashevis hit his stride, and no longer needed a parodic foil to stimulate his American Yiddish muse. He had found his own way of superimposing the two triangles of desire, the one erotic, the other, geographic. In *Enemies: A Love Story* (1966), each woman lives in a different borough of Greater New York, and each borough represents a distinctly different realm of desire.

The main locale, as many may remember, if not from reading the novel then from seeing Paul Mazursky's superb screen version of 1989, is Coney Island, a perfect choice, because the Yiddish-speaking immigrants have moved in en masse, even as the amusement park has gone downhill. The year is 1946.

Here is Herman Broder standing at the window, just as alienated from his surroundings as Zarkhi before him, and for good reason, because everything about Herman is fake. As a ghost writer for a fake rabbi, he peddles ideas he does not believe in, and lives with a fake-Jewish wife in a fake-Jewish home.

A few blocks away, the ocean heaved. From the Boardwalk and Surf Avenue came the noises of a Coney Island summer morning. Yet, on the little street between Mermaid and Neptune Avenues, everything was quiet. A light breeze was blowing; a few trees grew there. Birds twittered in the branches. The incoming tide brought with it a smell of fish, and something undefinable, a stench of putrefaction. When Herman put his head out of the window, he could see old shipwrecks that had been abandoned in the bay. Armored creatures had attached themselves to the slimy hulls – half alive, half sunk in primeval sleep.

(*Enemies*, 15)

So something is rotten in the borough of Brooklyn. Whatever moments of serenity Herman will experience with Jadwiga, the Polish peasant woman who saved him from the Nazis, America itself will never meet his spiritual needs. For all his paranoia, however, Herman realizes the difference between Europe and America. Inside the subway, on his way to Rabbi Milton Lampert's office, Herman concludes that "here the young seemed dominated by lust for enjoyment rather than for mischief" (18).

A kind of mischief bedevils Herman's life, however. Her name is Masha, and she lives in a semi-abandoned house in a derelict part of the Bronx. The subway ride there is akin to a descent into Hell. "What would happen," Herman wonders as he walks up the rickety stairs to the apartment that Masha shares with her survivor-mother, Shifra-Puah, "if the earth were to split into two parts, exactly between the Bronx and Brooklyn? He would have to remain here" (32). Here, where Shifra-Puah, dressed in black, constantly complains that something is burning, and where Masha's red hair is described as "fire and pitch" and a cigarette always dangles between her full lips – here is literally the abode of the demons. When Masha fails to drag him down to Hell at novel's end, he is consigned to Purgatory instead.

In between, Herman's first wife Tamara, presumably killed by the Nazis, rises from the dead and finds her way to the Lower East Side. So Herman is caught within a structure of triangular desire that looks something like this:

Tamara, whom he meets in the home of a real rabbi, where the smells and the rhythms are the same as they were in Poland, preserves the memory of their two murdered children, and thus represents the immediate, severed past.

Masha, who lives in a haunted house in the Bronx, inhabits the demonic present.

And Jadwiga, the Righteous Gentile, who lives in Coney Island, represents an all-too-perfect future. Jadwiga, following upon her heartfelt conversion to Judaism, gets pregnant with Herman's only living progeny.

In *Enemies*, therefore, the structure of triangular desire is rendered that much more tangible, inevitable, by a substratum of irrational, demonic, forces. Of course, it takes a hopelessly neurotic, hyper-intellectual, and traumatized Holocaust survivor to experience the three boroughs of New York City in quite the way that Herman Broder does, and it comes as no surprise that he ultimately quits the scene, leaving two out of the three women to raise his newborn daughter.

No one would confuse *Enemies* with a novel by Sholem Asch. For Asch, we recall, each point on the compass had an "objective," historical, reality. Kuzmin was the seat of the dead past as Uncle Moses' sweatshop embodied the unredeemed present, as Coney Island represented the messianic future. Asch's allegorical landscape was populist, in keeping with the conventions of Yiddish popular fiction. Bashevis Singer, writing for Asch's old paper – soon to be the only Yiddish secular daily, then weekly, in America – exploits the same conventions for opposite ends. Herman Broder inhabits a subjective-demonic landscape which, if anything, hearkens back to Zarkhi's song of the Coney Island seashore. Singer's triangular romance is a soft-core version of Halpern's ontology of exile.

From beginning to end, during a hundred years of solicitude, Yiddish literature in America gave voice to an anxious present caught between a severed past and an unattainable future.

From beginning to end, Yiddish poets, playwrights, and prose writers, exploiting a language that was itself the sum and substance of three different cultural realms, found new means to render this structure of triangular desire: from the forbidding *mokem*, *korner vey un elnt* (Off-limits... corner pain and anguish) which straddles the distant Lithuanian village and even more distant Promised Land of socialist brotherhood and national rebirth; to the sweatshop of Uncle Moses, located midway between Kuzmin and the beach-cum-amusement-park at Coney Island; to the Coney Island seashore after dark, as opposed to the seashore in the light of day, and the seashore after death; to the Boardwalk, located midway between the Bronx and the Lower East Side.

Whether they stand with their backs to America and their faces to the sea, or face the opposite direction; whether together or alone; whether in longing or loathing, the immigrants and exiles who populate the pages of American Yiddish literature occupy a unique, liminal space.

Is this Boardwalk here their own,
As it is, in light of dawn?
Sure, it's their Boardwalk. What, not their Boardwalk?

NOTES

1. Note the absence of certain key passages from the English edition.
2. Referred to as Yitskhok Bashevis in the Yiddish literary world, and as Isaac Bashevis Singer in the non-Yiddish literary world.

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